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**We're All In This Together: The US-Vietnam Defense Relationship in an  
Offshore-Balanced Pacific Pivot**

**by**

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**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily  
endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

**Signature:**

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Heath L. Marcus".

**1 November 2013**

## **ABSTRACT**

The United States' 2011 decision to "Pivot to the Pacific" represents a shift to an Offshore Balancing national grand strategy with renewed focus on the important Asia-Pacific region. Offshore Balancing allows the US to prioritize and reduce its overall worldwide commitments in an era of constrained resources following more than a decade of war in the Middle East. In keeping with the tenets of Offshore Balancing, the United States seeks partners in the Asia-Pacific region to help balance a rising China, particularly in the South China Sea, the primary strategic battlespace in which the Pacific Pivot will be executed. Vietnam, as a South China Sea littoral nation, is poised to become one of the strongest of these regional "balancers." This paper explores the US decision for the Pacific Pivot in the context of an Offshore Balancing strategy, outlines the history of an increasingly-warming relationship between the US and Vietnam, and suggests three primary "pillars" on which the United States can base future defense cooperation with Vietnam in order to ensure that country can become a credible balancer and significant strategic partner for the US in South Asia.

## Introduction

Throughout the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the United States found itself drawn into two protracted conflicts and associated nation-building efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Coupled with the after-effects of a crippling recession and economic crisis, the drawdown of these two wars has led the US to reevaluate its security interests and posture around the globe. In doing so, Asia-Pacific is on the rise as a strategic region of focus, while Europe (and to a lesser extent, the greater Middle East) declines in influence. Given significant economic and military growth in the region, particularly by China, it is natural that the US sees Asia as increasingly strategically significant. Beginning in late 2011, the Obama administration began outlining this new security focus for the nation, commonly referred to as the “Pivot to Asia” or “Pivot to the Pacific.”<sup>1</sup>

The Pacific Pivot represents realignment towards a national grand strategy of Offshore Balancing,<sup>2</sup> one in which the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is poised to become a critical strategic partner to help counter the emergence of China as a regional hegemon. The South China Sea (SCS), with its vast resources and critical trade routes, represents the key strategic battlespace for both Vietnamese and US national security interests. To fully support the nation’s SCS-focused Offshore Balancing grand strategy, the United States’ future defense cooperation with Vietnam must focus on three primary pillars – base access, arms sales, and exercises and training – to help establish Vietnam as a credible “balancer” to a rising China in this emerging region of importance.<sup>3</sup>

## Offshore Balancing as a Grand Strategy<sup>4</sup>

Grand strategy may be generally defined as the “plan that a nation uses to employ its tools of power to achieve national interests in the face of threats during peacetime and war.”<sup>5</sup>

Whereas American strategy during most of the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century focused on ensuring US capabilities permitted extensive involvement nearly worldwide using all instruments of national power,<sup>6</sup> Offshore Balancing supposes a more limited employment of the US military and a greater reliance on other countries to counter the rise of any potential hegemon within their geopolitical region. The strategy comprises four key concepts or tenets. The first of these is that the United States cannot over-reach in its global presence. The nation must prioritize its commitments to the most important regions of concern, such as Asia-Pacific, while reducing its presence in less vital areas. Second, the strategy relies on other nations to increase their role in maintaining stability in their regions as the US reduces its military presence. Third, Offshore Balancing places greater emphasis on the US Navy and US Air Force than it does on conventional land forces. Finally, the strategy avoids complicated attempts at “nation-building,” the export of democracy, or other similar liberal-interventionist policies.<sup>7</sup> A properly-structured security cooperation arrangement with Vietnam as the United States executes its Pivot to the Pacific will complement this new strategic outlook.

### The Pivot to the Pacific

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton first presented the idea of the Pacific Pivot in an October 2011 *Foreign Policy* article in which she asserted, “One of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will therefore be to lock in a substantially increased investment – diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise – in the Asia-Pacific region.”<sup>8</sup> The shift was further emphasized in a speech given by President Barack Obama to the Australian Parliament in November 2011. The President indicated “the United States is turning our attention to the vast potential of the Asia Pacific region” because of “a fundamental truth – the United States has been, and always will be, a Pacific nation.”<sup>9</sup> In

January 2012, these statements were followed up by the publication of the Defense Strategic Guidance, entitled *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Defense*, which asserted “we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region.”<sup>10</sup>

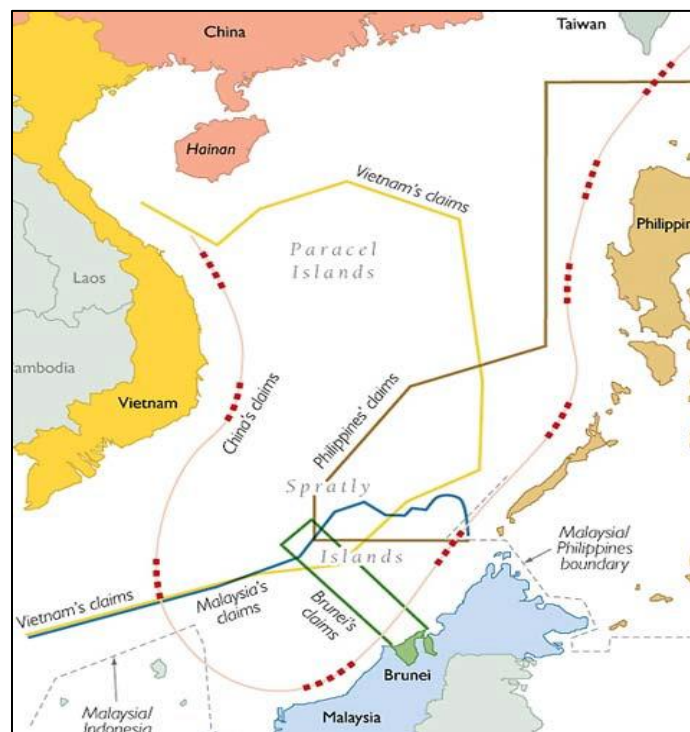
These statements reflect the underlying change in strategic focus for the United States, prompted by several developments of the past decade, including the Iraq/Afghanistan drawdowns, China’s economic rise and increasing military capability, and the declining US economy and efforts to reduce overall and defense expenditures.<sup>11</sup> The renewed US focus on Asia-Pacific preserves and strengthens US interests worldwide in light of these developments.

#### South China Sea: The Pivot’s Focal Point

In the context of the US strategic documents, the Asia-Pacific region cuts a wide swath of geography to include not only East Asia, but also southern Asia and as far west as the shores of the Indian subcontinent.<sup>12</sup> In spite of this broad geographic view, however, the South China Sea represents the logical and most prudent focal point of the US efforts and operations in the region – in doctrinal terms, it would be called key terrain – due to its strategic location along international sea lines of communication (which are critical to commerce and trade throughout the region), its vast potential of untapped natural resources and economic opportunity, and its history as an area of geopolitical competition among China and other Southeast Asian nations, including Vietnam. As such, Secretary Clinton specifically called “defending freedom of navigation in the South China Sea” an important component of the United States’ economic and strategic interests in the region.<sup>13</sup>

The South China Sea, with an area of nearly 1.4 million square miles, ranges from Singapore and the strategic chokepoint Strait of Malacca on the southern edge, to the Taiwan

Strait in the north. Ten Southeast Asian nations border on the sea, with many claiming territorial or economic rights to all or part of the ocean area or several disputed islands within it based on historical claims or economic zones under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) principles (Figure 1).<sup>14</sup> The sea is of vital importance to world economics and trade, with approximately half of all worldwide commercial goods transiting its waters annually, and more than one trillion dollars of US trade flowing through the area.<sup>15</sup>



**Figure 1: Competing Claims in the South China Sea<sup>16</sup>**

In addition to serving as a flow point for commerce, the South China Sea is itself home to abundant natural resources, primarily oil and natural gas, as well as to significant fisheries exploited by a number of Asian nations. The United States estimates the region may have as much as 28 billion barrels of current or yet-to-be-tapped oil resources, while Chinese estimates run nearly four times higher.<sup>17</sup> Natural gas resources are perhaps even

more plentiful than oil and may comprise 60%-70% of all the hydrocarbon resources in the sea.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, since the sea also supplies about ten percent of the world's fishing catch, the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission notes, "[f]ishing is an important driver of conflict in the South China Sea."<sup>19</sup>

Not surprisingly, the competition for resources and desire to ensure free flow of goods in the South China Sea region have resulted in a long history of disputes among the neighboring nations. While the geopolitical rivalry has typically involved diplomatic maneuvering and bluster, both bilaterally and within the context of regional or global organizations, there have also been significant "hot" events which have ratcheted up tensions over the years.<sup>20</sup> It is into this competitive geopolitical arena that the United States is (re-) engaging as it executes its Pivot to the Pacific and seeks to further strengthen its emerging security relationship with Vietnam.

#### History & Current Status of the US-Vietnam Relationship

The history of US-Vietnam relations extends to 1873 when the Nguyen Dynasty sent a representative to Washington in an attempt to secure diplomatic recognition for Vietnam; he was ultimately unsuccessful in attempts to secure a meeting with President Grant. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Office of Strategic Services (OSS) agents helped train Ho Chi Minh and his forces in northern Vietnam, leading to Vietnam's independence in September, 1945. The United States then found itself fighting those same forces when it became embroiled in Vietnam's civil war during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>21</sup>

Following the US and South Vietnamese defeat and the subsequent unification of Vietnam under Communist rule, diplomatic relations between the US and Vietnam were severed. Washington maintained a strict trade embargo against Vietnam and continued to

demand full accounting for US Prisoners of War/Missing in Action (POW/MIA) from the war era and removal of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia, which it invaded in 1978. The relationship continued along a rocky path until the mid-1980s, when Vietnam began to adopt its policy of “doi moi” market-oriented economic reforms and began to disengage forces from Cambodia. The collapse of the Soviet Union, Communist Vietnam’s traditional sponsor, further helped propel normalization of relations with the United States, which occurred formally in July, 1995.<sup>22</sup>

Progress in the relationship continued with the signing of a bilateral trade agreement in 2000 and President Clinton’s visit to Vietnam in November of that year, the first such visit in 31 years. During this visit, Clinton commented on US concerns about Vietnam’s commitment to democracy and human rights, issues which continue to cloud the relationship up to the present day.<sup>23</sup> Bilateral diplomatic exchanges and interaction between the two nations in multilateral forums such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meetings continued apace throughout the 2000s. By 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton remarked on a state visit to Hanoi that “the Obama Administration is prepared to take the US-Vietnam relationship to the next level....We see this relationship not only as important on its own merits, but as part of a strategy aimed at enhancing American engagement in the Asia Pacific and in particular Southeast Asia.”<sup>24</sup> Echoing her husband from a decade earlier, however, she continued to press Vietnam on the potential relationship stumbling block of social and human rights: “Vietnam, with its extraordinary dynamic population, is on the path to becoming a great nation with an unlimited potential. And that is among the reasons we express concern about

arrest and conviction of people for peaceful dissent, attacks on religious groups, and curbs on internet freedom.”<sup>25</sup>

In spite of this ongoing concern over rights, the centerpiece of US-Vietnamese relations in the nearly two decades since formal ties were re-established has been economic. The United States is the second largest international trading partner for Vietnam (after China), with bilateral trade reaching \$18.6 billion in 2010.<sup>26</sup> The US was instrumental in assisting Vietnam with entry into the World Trade Organization in 2007, and both nations are currently involved in negotiations for the formal establishment of, and membership in, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) multilateral trade organization for the Asia-Pacific region.

Although it progressed more slowly than economic interaction, the security relationship between the two nations has begun to expand rapidly in recent years. Until the mid-2000s, defense relations were characterized by legacy issues from the Vietnam War, including POW/MIA accounting, demining, and Agent Orange compensation to Vietnamese victims.<sup>27</sup> Early efforts at normalizing defense ties began in the mid-1990s, proceeded cautiously, and encompassed US Pacific Command (PACOM)-hosted multilateral conferences, senior-level military official visits, and uncontroversial cooperation in practical areas such as search and rescue, demining, and military medicine. As each side carefully tried to “feel out” the other in this early phase, the Heritage Foundation pointed out, “the US referred to ‘defense relations’ [while] the Vietnamese spoke of ‘military-to-military contacts,’ implying a relationship that was vastly more confined and modest than a defense relationship.”<sup>28</sup>

The military relationship continued to warm, however, facilitated over the ensuing decade by smaller trust-building programs. These included a series of US Navy port calls

(fourteen total between 2003 and 2012) from which Vietnam recognized both political and economic benefits,<sup>29</sup> the first bilateral naval exercises in 2010 and the Defense Policy Dialogue that same year, the first such direct high-level military-to-military forum.<sup>30</sup> These efforts ultimately led to the signing of a defense Memorandum of Understanding in 2011 which expanded cooperation in five areas: maritime security, search and rescue, United Nations peacekeeping operations, humanitarian aid and disaster relief, and collaboration between defense universities and research organizations.<sup>31</sup> The first Vietnamese officer enrolled in the US National Defense University in 2011,<sup>32</sup> and the Naval War College began welcoming Vietnamese students back for the first time since 1973, with one Vietnamese student currently enrolled in the Naval Staff College class of 2014.<sup>33</sup>

In 2012, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta visited Cam Ranh Bay, used previously by the US during the war, where the USNS *Richard Byrd* was undergoing repair at the civilian shipyard. Panetta indicated the US wanted to continue to work with Vietnam “on critical maritime issues including a code of conduct focusing on the South China Sea,” and noted that access to repair facilities at Cam Ranh Bay had significant logistical as well as political implications in pursuit of US national security objectives in Southeast Asia.<sup>34</sup>

#### Defense Cooperation Pillar 1: Access to ports and bases for rotational forward presence

Panetta’s 2012 visit highlights what should be the first of three focus areas, or pillars, of PACOM’s future defense cooperation efforts with Vietnam – namely, securing access to Vietnamese ports and bases for US military units. Such basing rights, executed by the United States on a non-permanent basis for rotational, rather than persistent, deployment of US forces, are in concert with the first and third tenets of an Offshore Balancing strategy.

From the beginning, the Pacific Pivot has included plans for a shift in US force presence to South Asia and the SCS region, including rotational deployment of US Marines to Australia, basing of four Navy Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) in Singapore, proposed movement of Marine units from Japan to Guam, and additional force rotations and renewed cooperation in the Philippines.<sup>35</sup> Naval and air basing in Vietnam will provide additional diversified locations from which US forces can perform the vital presence mission in the South China Sea.

Although Secretary Panetta's 2012 visit to USNS *Richard Byrd* was politically and historically significant to mark advances in the overall US-Vietnamese relationship, USPACOM needs to press for more significant cooperation on the base access issue. The *Byrd* visited the commercial side of Cam Ranh Bay for repairs in the shipyard there as the main pretext for its visit. Vietnam has openly welcomed the economic benefit reaped by opening the Cam Ranh repair facilities to "all navies of the world" since 2009,<sup>36</sup> but such commercial access is not the type that the US truly needs to ensure options for rotational presence in the SCS. Rather, US warships (not just noncombat/auxiliary ships) need to be able to use the naval side of Vietnamese ports such as Cam Ranh Bay or Da Nang when conducting routine forward presence and security missions.

There may be some cost associated with assisting Vietnam in "upgrading" key ports and bases, but since both the US and Vietnamese militaries would derive benefit, it would be a worthwhile investment for the United States and fully in concert with the national strategy. The US may have also some unintended assistance with this pillar of defense cooperation if Russia follows through with base infrastructure upgrades promised in the wake of its 2009 sale of Kilo-class submarines to Vietnam.<sup>37</sup> Although the Russians also likely desire

increased access to Vietnamese ports,<sup>38</sup> this should not raise undue security concerns for the US; Russian presence in the SCS region represents an additional counterweight to China in the region consistent with Offshore Balancing. The Russian interest may actually give PACOM some leverage in pressing the port access issue with Vietnam – essentially, by couching it in terms of “we are not looking to take over your bases, we’d just like you to provide more access to us and any others who can provide tangible and mutually-beneficial security benefits.”

While naval port facilities are an obvious focus area for increased US access in Vietnam, air facilities must also be considered. The air facility at Cam Ranh Bay (since converted to a commercial terminal) or other air bases throughout Vietnam would be important for US Air Force or Navy aviation access. Given that the US has significant air assets already permanently based in Northern Asia and is working for increased rotational air basing in Australia as another component of the Pacific Pivot, the need for aviation facilities in Vietnam may not be as critical as for naval bases. However, securing deployment sites for platforms such as unarmed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) to ensure a persistent intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capability in the SCS would be mutually beneficial for the United States and Vietnam and should be included in the basing pillar of PACOM’s defense cooperation efforts.

#### Defense Cooperation Pillar 2: Foreign Military Sales

The second pillar of US defense engagement should focus on increasing Foreign Military Sales to Vietnam, which is an area that has not progressed in spite of the rapidly-improving overall defense relations. The military arms embargo has been in place since 1984, but was relaxed somewhat in 2007 to allow the sale of “non-lethal” items on a case-by-

case basis.<sup>39</sup> The overriding issue limiting more advanced military hardware sales, voiced by a sizeable Vietnamese-American community with considerable influence among members of Congress, continues to be Vietnam's dubious human and social rights record.<sup>40</sup>

While continuing to impress upon Vietnam the need for improvement in the area of human rights in order to get the embargo lifted, USPACOM should simultaneously continue efforts to persuade US policymakers that relaxing the arms embargo serves the vital US national interest. Sale of more advanced arms postures Vietnam to be a better SCS balancer while at the same time provides another avenue to strengthen economic ties between the countries by increasing the market for the US defense industry. Furthermore, Vietnam has indicated that lifting the embargo is a key criteria to considering the US relationship fully normalized.<sup>41</sup>

The Vietnamese People's Navy (VPN) and Vietnam Maritime Police (VMP)<sup>42</sup> have increased their patrolling and deterrent capabilities in the past several years with the purchase of Gepard-class frigates and Kilo-class submarines from Russia. Future naval purchases are likely to focus on additional small surface ships (frigate/corvette size) for littoral operations within its SCS Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), as well as naval transports to service its island possessions in the Spratlys and Paracels. Decommissioned American warships such as Newport-class LSTs, which the US has sold to other allies, could serve in this latter role. Decommissioned helicopter-capable amphibious ships could also augment Vietnam's maritime search and rescue or ISR capacity.<sup>43</sup> Given the maritime nature and strategic significance of the SCS, the US should also endeavor to increase Vietnam's maritime patrol aircraft capability, which is currently handled by a combination of six DHC-6 400 Canadian

Twin Otter and three European C212 surveillance aircraft.<sup>44</sup> As the United States phases out its fleet of P-3 aircraft, transferring these assets to Vietnam would make good strategic sense.

In the ground and air forces, Vietnam currently possesses a large amount of US-made weapons left over from the Vietnam War. While much is outdated, equipment like armored personnel carriers, some transports and helicopters “could be upgraded by Americans to enhance their safety, range, payload, avionics, and engines for fuel efficiency” and placed back into effective use by the Vietnamese People’s Army (VPA) or Air Force (VPAF).<sup>45</sup>

The VPAF has purchased high-end Russian aircraft in recent years to handle the majority of its air-to-air and air-to-ground missions. Should the VPAF seek to replace its large fleet of older MiG-21 fighters, it could possibly look to purchase Mid-Life Upgrade F16s from the US. However, Vietnam may also consider less “high end” aircraft built in a third country in conjunction with an American defense contractor, such Lockheed Martin’s South Korean-built TA-50 trainer/fighter.<sup>46</sup> A “high-low mix” of its current advanced fourth generation aircraft coupled with more plentiful but less-robustly-capable assets would therefore provide Vietnam with a credible airborne deterrent which can help serve its balancer role within the region. Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft, US medium- and heavy-lift helicopters, as well as transport aircraft (C-130 or C-27), and unmanned ISR platforms such as the MQ-1/Predator would also serve Vietnam’s needs well.<sup>47</sup>

If the arms embargo can be lifted, Vietnam likely would start purchases on a smaller scale, focusing initially on spare parts and perhaps coastal radar, air defense and the maritime patrol aircraft.<sup>48</sup> No matter how large in scope US arms sales ultimately become, these equipment purchases nevertheless would strengthen the overall relationship between the

countries and would facilitate Vietnam's participation in future military engagement with US counterparts.

### Defense Cooperation Pillar 3: Substantive military exercises and training

The third and final pillar of PACOM's defense cooperation strategy should be to include Vietnam in significant bilateral or multilateral exercises and other training opportunities, thereby capitalizing and improving upon the 2011 Defense Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the two nations. Such inclusion will not only increase the interoperability of US and Vietnam forces but will also strengthen the confidence and capability of the Vietnamese armed forces as they step up to be a credible regional balancer in South Asia.

One exercise from which the Vietnamese would benefit is the United States' bi-annual Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise. Begun in 1971, the exercise has included an expanded number of participants in recent years, to include the addition of Russia and India in 2012.<sup>49</sup> China has accepted an invitation to participate in 2014, although it is currently unclear how extensive its participation will be.<sup>50</sup> Inviting Vietnam to participate in future RIMPAC exercises (2016 and beyond) would not only improve US-Vietnam military integration, but would also allow Vietnam and China to work cooperatively in a multilateral military forum as well. This would augment the military "hotline" that China and Vietnam have previously established to handle South China Sea issues by providing another forum where the two could interact in a substantive manner.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to RIMPAC and other multilateral exercises (COBRA GOLD, CARAT or the Australian-led PITCH BLACK are excellent opportunities), PACOM should seek to include or expand Vietnam's participation in bilateral training and exercise opportunities

with United States forces. Such training in the recent past has included search-and-rescue, naval steaming (“PASSEX”) or salvage-focused efforts.<sup>52</sup> The Heritage Foundation notes the continuation of these types of engagements, along with emphasis on the “roles, missions, and responsibilities of the military in international combined military efforts,” and “delivering training packages that enhance communications and coordination in joint exercises” will greatly serve to enhance Vietnamese capabilities and will thus further promote it as a credible regional power.<sup>53</sup>

#### An Alternative View: Human Rights Concerns Are Paramount

Some may argue that while the United States’ Offshore Balancing strategy may benefit from an increased partnership with Vietnam, the relationship must not be further enhanced until and unless Vietnam makes drastic improvements in its deplorable human and social rights record. After all, these critics argue, the promotion of such values in one of the four primary “interests” outlined by President Obama in the United States’ National Security Strategy.<sup>54</sup> They cite international monitoring organizations such as Freedom House, which tracks such issues worldwide and currently rates Vietnam as “not free” on its scale of overall political rights and civil liberties.<sup>55</sup> As a one party, authoritarian nation, Vietnam routinely cracks down on press and internet freedoms, ethnic minorities, and religious freedom, and has done little to enhance workers’ rights or mitigate human trafficking. As a result, US critics have attempted to limit further US cooperation via introduction in Congress of the Vietnam Human Rights Act, in order to place continuing pressure on Vietnam to improve its record in this arena.<sup>56</sup>

In spite of the noble argument that Vietnam can and should improve how it treats its citizens, such argument must not be the overriding factor in determining the future of the US-

Vietnamese defense relationship. This does not suppose that human rights are unimportant, but rather that when it comes to US strategic interests in the South China Sea, values-based issues are of lesser importance than other more traditional military concerns. Moreover, subverting rights issues to higher-level strategic concerns is rather commonplace in US strategic engagement: “Washington,” the Asia Times has noted, “has a long history of partnering with authoritarian states.”<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Robert Kaplan notes that “[i]n the Western Pacific in the coming decades, morality may mean giving up some of our most cherished ideals for the sake of stability.”<sup>58</sup>

The United States’ actions, not only throughout history but also in the recent past, have served to support this notion that other security interests are often elevated over values-based ones, or what Rajaram Panda terms “prioritize[ing] strategic and economic interests over normative ones.”<sup>59</sup> President Obama’s first-ever visit to Myanmar in late 2012 signaled a potential willingness to overlook what had previously been a human rights stumbling block to establishing successful relations with that country, while the US has continued significant political relationships with countries like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain that have also been plagued by rights issues. Angola, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine are similar examples cited by Panda.<sup>60</sup> More importantly, President Obama, in a 2013 speech at the United Nations, reaffirmed “a larger point: the United States will at times work with governments that do not meet the highest international expectations, but who work with us on our core interests. But we will not stop asserting principles that are consistent with our ideals...[which are] the birthright of every person.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, the United States can and should proceed with the defense engagement priorities outlined in this paper in spite of Vietnam’s less-than-stellar human rights record; such policy serves the strategic interest of both nations.

## Conclusion

America's strategic future, therefore, lies in South Asia and the South China Sea due to that region's criticality as a nexus of military capabilities, global trade and natural resources. Bordering directly on the SCS, Vietnam is poised to be a primary strategic partner for the US in the region. As the US executes its Offshore-Balanced Pacific Pivot, it should take measures to ensure Vietnam can step up to become a "balancer of first resort" against an emergent China and allow the United State to be a "balancer of last resort."

The recent history of US-Vietnamese relations provides every reason to believe that Vietnam can become a credible regional balancer, but there is still more work to be done. As it moves forward in further defining the defense relationship, USPACOM's efforts should center on the three defense cooperation pillars of increased basing access for rotational force presence, the lifting of the current arms embargo to facilitate Foreign Military Sales and expand Vietnamese military capacity and capability, and inclusion of Vietnamese forces in substantive multilateral and bilateral military exercises and training events. Improving the defense relationship along these three pillars allows the US to use the military instrument effectively in meeting the primary tenets of its Offshore Balancing national strategy.

Accomplishing these goals, however, will require significant engagement within the US domestic policymaking apparatus to overcome human rights concerns which currently hinder an improved relationship. However, US precedent in dealing with other nations with dubious values shows that such concerns can be surmounted when higher-order national security interests are at stake. Shoring up Vietnam as a primary regional partner and balancer in the South China Sea region presents the best option for the United States to secure a

prominent, but ultimately not indispensable, role as a key player in the Asia-Pacific region well into the future.

### Recommendations

- Maintain focus on the South China Sea as the key focal point for executing an Offshore Balancing grand strategy for the United States and incorporate Vietnam as a primary regional partner to accomplish the strategy.
- USPACOM's defense cooperation strategy should focus on three pillars of defense cooperation, with the understanding that not all can be directly implemented by PACOM, but may require the Combatant Commander's influence on national level policymakers to guide the strategy:
  - Defense Cooperation Pillar 1: Secure Access to Vietnamese ports and bases for rotational US forward presence.
  - Defense Cooperation Pillar 2: Eliminate Arms Embargo and increase Foreign Military Sales.
  - Defense Cooperation Pillar 3: Include Vietnam in expanded multilateral and bilateral exercises and training events.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> There are numerous variations of the terminology for this strategic shift in multiple reference documents, including substitution of “rebalancing” for the term “pivot.” For consistency, “Pivot to the Pacific” or the shorter variant “Pacific Pivot” is used throughout this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Layne, “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America’s Future Grand Strategy,” *International Security*, vol. 22, No. 1 (Summer 1997), 86-124.

<sup>3</sup> The efforts outlined in this paper are, in the opinion of the author, the best means of advancing Vietnam as a key strategic partner and regional balancer in support of the United States’ SCS-focused Offshore Balancing strategy. It is purposely US-centric in its viewpoint. Vietnam has its own security interests in the region, including a relationship with China marked by both a long history of military conflict and significant economic interdependence. The ideas offered here thus represent the “optimal” application of effort to best advance the US strategy, but some level of compromise will likely ultimately be required in order to ensure congruence between US and Vietnamese interests.

<sup>4</sup> Heath L. Marcus, “Call Me Maybe: An Offshore Balancing Variant of the United States’ ‘Pacific Pivot,’” (research paper, US Naval War College (NWC) National Security Affairs department, Newport, RI, 31 January 2013). The background information on Offshore Balancing, the Pacific Pivot, and the importance of the South China Sea were first explored in this author’s Strategies Paper for the NWC NSDM course and are repeated here to provide context for the United States’ military engagement with Vietnam.

<sup>5</sup> US Naval War College, College of Naval Warfare, *National Security Decision Making Course: Nov 2012-Feb 2013 Syllabus and Study Guide* (Newport, RI, 2012), Strategies-33.

<sup>6</sup> Sometimes referred to as “Primacy,” Layne refers this strategy as “Preponderance.” See Layne, “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing,” 86-111.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Layne, “The Global Power Shift from East to West,” *The National Interest*, 119 (May/Jun 2012), 21-31, accessed 20 December 2012. ProQuest. Layne also includes as a fifth tenet the reduction of the US military footprint in the Middle East. Since this is essentially a manifestation of the first concept, prioritizing regional commitments, it is not listed as a separate component of the strategy for the purposes of this paper.

<sup>8</sup> Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, November 2011, accessed 5 January 2013, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas\\_pacific\\_century](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century).

<sup>9</sup> Barack Obama, “Speech to the Australian Parliament,” 17 November 2011, accessed 5 January 2013, [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2011/11/17/obamas\\_speech\\_to\\_the\\_australian\\_parliament\\_112124.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2011/11/17/obamas_speech_to_the_australian_parliament_112124.html).

<sup>10</sup> US Department of Defense, *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Defense* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2012), 2. This Defense Strategic Guidance (DSG) contains numerous elements aligning with the overall strategy of Offshore Balancing (beyond just focusing on Asia-Pacific), including a call for “small foot-print” approaches to achieving security objectives (p.3); “sharing the costs and responsibilities of global leadership” with other nations (p.3); “thoughtful choices...regarding the location and frequency of [overseas] operations” (p.6); and emphasis that US forces will not be sized for future prolonged stability operations (p.6), but will receive investment to ensure their effectiveness in an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) environment (pp.4-5) – essentially indicating a focus on naval/air capability at the expense of sizeable ground forces.

<sup>11</sup> Mark E. Manyan, et al, “Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration’s ‘Rebalancing’ Toward Asia,” *Congressional Research Service*, 28 March 2012, 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century.”

<sup>14</sup> The nations bordering the South China Sea are China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.

<sup>15</sup> US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2012 Report to Congress*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, November 2012), 238. The statistic measures the overall tonnage of goods shipped.

<sup>16</sup> James Bellacqua, “The China Factor in US-Vietnam Relations,” *CNA China Studies*, March 2012, 27, accessed 21 September 2013, [www.dtic.mil/get-tr-doc/pdf?AD=ADA560712](http://www.dtic.mil/get-tr-doc/pdf?AD=ADA560712).

<sup>17</sup> US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2012 Report to Congress*, 234.

<sup>18</sup> US Energy Information Administration, “South China Sea,” accessed 6 January 2013, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/regions-topics.cfm?fips=SCS>.

<sup>19</sup> US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2012 Report to Congress*, 229.

<sup>20</sup> Leszek Buszynski, “The South China Sea: Oil, Maritime Claims, and US-China Strategic Rivalry,” *The Washington Quarterly*, 35:2 (Spring 2012), 140-144. For other descriptive events, also see US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 216-222.

<sup>21</sup> Ngan M. Kim, “US-Vietnam Military Relations: Game Theory Perspective,” (Master’s Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, June 2012), 9, accessed 10 September 2013, [www.viet-studies.info/kinhte/US\\_VN\\_MilRel\\_GameTheory.pdf](http://www.viet-studies.info/kinhte/US_VN_MilRel_GameTheory.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>24</sup> US Department of State, “Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton Remarks with Vietnam Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Gia Khiem,” Government Guest House, Hanoi, Vietnam, 22 July 2010, accessed 3 October 2013, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/07/145034.htm>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Kim, “US-Vietnam Military Relations: Game Theory Perspective,” 12.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>28</sup> William Jordan, Lewis M. Stern and Walter Lohman, “US-Vietnam Defense Relations: Investing in Strategic Alignment,” *The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder*, no. 2707 (18 July 2012), 3-4, accessed 10 September 2013, <http://report.heritage.org/bg2707>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>30</sup> Mark E. Manyan, “US-Vietnam Relations in 2013: Current Issues and Implications for US Policy,” *Congressional Research Service*, 26 July 2013, 22. Previously, defense cooperation was included as a subcomponent of broader State Department-led engagements in which a variety of topics were discussed.

<sup>31</sup> Bellacqua, “The China Factor in US-Vietnam Relations,” 1. Jordan, et al, “US-Vietnam Defense Relations: Investing in Strategic Alignment,” 8.

<sup>32</sup> Lewis M. Stern, “Building Strategic Relations with Vietnam,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, issue 65 (2<sup>nd</sup> quarter 2012), 57-58, accessed 10 September 2013. *Military & Government Collection*, EBSCOhost.

<sup>33</sup> Email correspondence between the author and CAPT Perry Yaw, Naval War College, 24 September 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Jim Garamone, “Panetta’s Cam Ranh Bay Visit Symbolizes Growing US-Vietnam Ties,” *American Forces Press Service*, 3 June 2012, accessed 10 September 2013, <http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=116597>.

<sup>35</sup> Manyan, et al, “Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration’s ‘Rebalancing’ Toward Asia,” 3-5.

<sup>36</sup> Carlyle Thayer, “Vietnam and the United States: Convergence but Not Congruence of Strategic Interests in the South China Sea.” *ISN Center for Security Studies*, 13 February 2013, accessed 10 September 2013, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Special-Feature/Detail/?lng=en&id=159647&contextid774=159647&contextid775=159646&tabid=1453526659>.

<sup>37</sup> IHS Jane’s *World Navies*, “Vietnam,” 4 October 2013, accessed 17 October 2013, <https://janes.ihs.com/CustomPages/Janes/DisplayPage.aspx?DocType=Reference&ItemId=++1303146&Pubabbrev=CNA>

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Bellacqua, “The China Factor in US-Vietnam Relations,” 30.

<sup>40</sup> Khanh Vu Doc, “Trampled Rights Restrict US-Vietnam Ties,” *Asia Times*, 1 August 2013, accessed 10 September 2013, [www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/SEA-01-010813.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/SEA-01-010813.html).

<sup>41</sup> Manyan, “US-Vietnam Relations in 2013: Current Issues and Implications for US Policy,” 23.

<sup>42</sup> The VMP formally split off from the Navy in 2008 and functions similarly to a coast guard enforcing maritime law, to include in Vietnam’s EEZ in the SCS. For ease of discussion, the term “navy” or “naval” will refer to maritime assets in general, without specification on whether they should be subordinated to VPN or VMP. See *Jane’s Defense Weekly*, “Powering Up,” 16 July 2013, accessed 17 October 2013, <https://janes.ihs.com/CustomPages/Janes/DisplayPage.aspx?DocType=News&ItemId=+++1580415&Pubabbrev=JDW>.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Weitz, “Balancing China Through Vietnam,” *Second Line of Defense*, 13 January 2011, accessed 24 September 2013, [www.sldinfo.com/balancing-china-through-vietnam](http://www.sldinfo.com/balancing-china-through-vietnam).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Regional neighbors like the Philippines are doing just this. See Richard Dudley, “Philippines Orders South Korean TA-50 Jets,” *Defense Update*, 25 June 2012, accessed 20 October 2013, [http://defense-update.com/20120625\\_philippines-orders-south-korean-ta-50-jets.html](http://defense-update.com/20120625_philippines-orders-south-korean-ta-50-jets.html).

<sup>47</sup> Weitz, “Balancing China Through Vietnam.”

<sup>48</sup> Thayer, “Vietnam and the United States: Convergence but Not Congruence of Strategic Interests in the South China Sea.”

<sup>49</sup> Robert Farley, “Should China Fear RIMPAC?” *The Diplomat Flashpoints Blog*, 8 August 2012, accessed 20 October 2013, [www.thediplomat.com/flashpoints-blog/2012/08/08/should-china-fear-rimpac/](http://www.thediplomat.com/flashpoints-blog/2012/08/08/should-china-fear-rimpac/).

<sup>50</sup> Zachary Keck, “China, RIMPAC, and Containment,” *The Diplomat Flashpoints Blog*, 3 April 2013, accessed 20 October 2013, [www.thediplomat.com/flashpoints-blog/2013/04/03/china-rimac-and-containment/](http://www.thediplomat.com/flashpoints-blog/2013/04/03/china-rimac-and-containment/).

<sup>51</sup> Zachary Keck, “It’s Official...China’s Coming to RIMPAC,” *The Diplomat Flashpoints Blog*, 10 June 2013, accessed 20 October 2013, [www.thediplomat.com/flashpoints-blog/2013/06/10/its-official-chinas-coming-to-rimpac/](http://www.thediplomat.com/flashpoints-blog/2013/06/10/its-official-chinas-coming-to-rimpac/).

<sup>52</sup> Manyan, “US-Vietnam Relations in 2013: Current Issues and Implications for US Policy,” 22.

<sup>53</sup> Jordan, et al, “US-Vietnam Defense Relations: Investing in Strategic Alignment,” 11.

<sup>54</sup> Office of the President of the United States, “National Security Strategy,” May 2010, accessed 15 Oct 2013, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> Freedom House website, accessed 10 October 2013, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/country/vietnam>.

<sup>56</sup> Manyan, “US-Vietnam Relations in 2013: Current Issues and Implications for US Policy,” 15-21.

<sup>57</sup> The Hanoist, “Obama’s Moral Dilemma in Vietnam,” *Asia Times*, 30 September 2010, accessed 24 September 2013, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/LI30Ae01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/LI30Ae01.html).

<sup>58</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, “The South China Sea is the Future of Conflict,” *Foreign Policy: The Future is Now Special Report*, Sept/Oct 2011, accessed 21 September 2013, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/08/15/the\\_south\\_china\\_sea\\_is\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_conflict](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/08/15/the_south_china_sea_is_the_future_of_conflict).

<sup>59</sup> Rajaram Panda, “US and Vietnam: Emerging Security Architecture in Southeast & East Asia,” *IPCS Special Commentary*, #4082, 9 August 2013, accessed 24 September 2013, [www.ipcs.org/article/china/ipcs-special-commentary-us-and-vietnam-emerging-security-architecture-in-4082.html](http://www.ipcs.org/article/china/ipcs-special-commentary-us-and-vietnam-emerging-security-architecture-in-4082.html).

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> “Text of Obama’s Speech at the UN,” *New York Times*, 24 September 2013, accessed 30 September 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/25/us/politics/text-of-obamas-speech-at-the-un.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/25/us/politics/text-of-obamas-speech-at-the-un.html?_r=0).

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